Princes

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Princes

by TigerPrawn

Summary

Reluctant Prince Will must take the throne his father gained by conquering the kingdom, little does he know that the true heir still lingers out on the lake.

A Hannigram retelling of Matthew Bourne's Swan Lake, drawing heavily on influences from NBC's Kings for Reel Hannibal Fest.

Chapter 1

The King stepped out to the front of the royal residence and seat of government, Unity Hall. Massive crowds of people below in Unity Plaza were roaring their support and waiting to hear him speak.

“I am blessed. I look at this city, that *we* built. Through industry, through ingenuity, through war and sacrifice and I *feel* that blessing. The city is the dream of a half century, and this morning we bring that dream into the day.”

He paused for the plentiful applause before continuing.

“There’s no surprise. I knew this day would come. I knew this land, these territories, once at war - factions fractured - were meant to be one nation. Together. At Peace. When I first looked out at the ruins that would become this great city, there was nothing. Ash, an empty shell of a city bombed ten times over by three armies, but I looked. And my eyes opened. And I saw Unity Hall right here,

as it stands today. I saw a great city, I saw it all as if it were all here already. United, under one flag, one King."

The crowd cheered again, calling his name. Chanting it.

The young prince stood behind the King with his mother and sister the king's aides. His life had built to this moment. He was young but old enough to remember his father as a soldier, before he was a General, and then the King. And now they stood on the low balcony of this glistening high rise that was their palace, and his father looked in bliss. He received the cheer with the sort of love he had once shown his family.

The prince remembered when his father had looked at him with that love and adoration.

"I pray, as I take my seat in this great new city, to be worthy of you and your trust."

The crowd roared and his father waved. It was, the prince pondered, a very different scene to the one behind the walls of Unity Hall. Where his father's aides and advisors worried about tension in the North and that border disputes with the neighbouring kingdom could escalate.

But if nothing else, the prince was sure that his father, a veteran of those Unity Wars, would do everything he could to prevent another war.

Ten Years Later

"Stay close William, if you are to be a great leader then you must know how to lead from the front."

"Yes, sir," Prince William replied as firmly as any seventeen year old could when facing the blaze before them.

His father, the King, had said these words to him many times during his childhood - those long years of war with the south. And now, as the Royal Regiment marched on the capital, the war was finally nearing closure.

The border had been in dispute for so many years that Will couldn't remember a time when there hadn't been trenches and battlefields to the south. But something had changed in this long held standoff. When King Hannibal's bombs had rained on the capital city of their Northern Alliance, it turned the tide. There was nothing more to lose.

The army had pushed through the trenches, over minefields. They had cleared a path and taken towns and cities in their wake. They reclaimed land once theirs back when the country had been united before, under a president, before the dictatorship had begun.

And now the King and his son stood in the centre of Unity City. Unity Hall before them, and a grim look on his father's face.

"There was a time when I wanted to believe in this man." The King muttered so that only Will could hear as the soldiers took up their places around them. "And I might have considered peace."

The once pristine highrise before them burned, half was rubble already and Will felt like his teeth might shake out of his head every time a tank rumbled passed them.

Will had been with his father on the frontline for many months, since they realised the war was drawing to a close. Before then they had been at varying strategic command centres that moved forward as their army did. And before that he had been a child in his mother's arms until she had become sick and died.

He'd watched her beautiful hair thin, he'd watched her arms grow frail. He'd watched his father marry Lady Bedelia in order to give Will a mother, but she came with none of the love or affection. At fourteen years old, Will had been happy to go to war. And now here they were.

"If only he had truly meant unity and not just been another tyrant." The King spoke louder this time and then added for all to hear, "One last push and we shall breach their walls. King Hannibal will surrender on his knees!" The King growled, his words met with a resounding 'hazzah!' from the troops around them.

"I will see this land united under one throne by the end of this day!" He promised with a clenched fist as more cries of support sounded.

The King was charismatic in a way Will was sure he never would be. He was a shy child, he enjoyed studying and using his not insubstantial intelligence. He enjoyed the strategy of war, telling himself it was a game and that the numbers he saw were merely points and not the deaths of countless resisters.

He was smart enough not to entirely believe his father, when he waxed lyrical on his rule. That he would be the one to unite the disperate kingdoms that had sprung up in the fall of the old United States of the Empire. Maybe one of the other six Kings had thought the same before he had conquered them though the sheer fact of his greater military might, supported by the natural resources found in his kingdom? Perhaps some of the kings had been despots as they were all taught, perhaps not? Perhaps his father was?

It didn't matter either way. Will was a prisoner to this life and time spent on dreaming of a time where he might have instead learned the knowledge of the entire kingdom and then perhaps taught it in classes, was time wasted. Time that should have been spent on learning how to best their enemy.

And the enemy? That was the king who had united much of the country, something his father had also wished to do. A rival for the same position with all these people caught in between.

Except for now. His father's pride wouldn't allow it. There would be nobody between them now. King to King. A terrible hubris that put both himself and his son in danger. But such was his father's confidence at finding a broken man within these walls, deserted and friendless, that it would be as simple as one king against the other.

"Victory!" The king let out his battlecry and it was chorused by all gathered, becoming a deafening din as the king raised his ceremonial sword and indicated for them to push forward. The troops moved and their cries were replaced by the sound of artillery fire as the king sheathed his sword and took up his own gun.

"This will be a great day," The king had to shout over the noise to Will. Will nodded and moved forward with the throng, weapon raised.

Chapter One

Will woke in a cold sweat, sitting bolt upright and gasping for breath.

He shook from the anguish and barely stifled a cry that he knew his stepmother, the Queen Regent, would comment on if she heard it echo the palace halls. As his cries had many times after he'd returned from the war.

After he'd returned an orphan.

And that was what his dreams contained. Night after night he relived the last day of the war. Watching in horror as one lucky shot took down his father and the army cried in rage and pressed onto the Unity Hall, giving no quarter.

It was a general that shot King Hannibal VII, waiting on no command from the young prince. And he was glad. He wasn't sure it was a command he could give. They were meant to take the Lecters alive but having just watched his father fall, in that hellish moment, he wanted them all dead.

It had been at the entrance to the great Unity Hall as the Lecter family tried to make their escape. Perhaps Will should be thankful that no one had heard him cry out in horror, over the shouting and firing. Not just the carnage, but this was not the wish of his father. He would have taken the royal family as political prisoners rather than risk making martyrs of them.

Will still remembered it all so clearly. The king falling as his own had, splashes of red across his white shirt. The queen screaming and falling to her knees, taken into custody. Their son, a little older than Will he knew, was not present and was never found. Probably spirited away by the king's guard.

Maybe it had been this outcome? Maybe it had been the death of his father, or the austere rule of his stepmother as regent in his stead? But what had followed had been civil unrest where there should now be the unity his father had hoped for. Hope was piled upon him to make a suitable match that would appease both government and populace.

Will let out a heavy sigh, sinking into his pillows and feeling the usual paralysis of apathy. It was simply all too big. And now his nightmares grew worse as he approached his twenty first birthday - his age of majority. He was expected to marry and ascend to the throne.

So much pressure to conform and…

Will squeezed his eyes shut, not allowing the thought to come to fruition. It was too dangerous to even think it. Once he had the throne he could try and make the peace his father had failed at. That was what was important. If he had to betray who he was, if he had to marry and consummate that marriage and provide heirs in order to ensure peace then he would do that.

His happiness was irrelevant. He had known that his whole life.

*

"William," Bedelia had a way of saying his name that made him feel like he was being sliced open and inspected.

He turned and looked at his stepmother, waiting silently for her to continue as they stood in the smallest of their dining rooms where they routinely had breakfast. "I am expecting you to make the most of today. There will be several noble women attending and the coronation approaches."

“Thank you mother,” Will replied meekly, “It’s good of you to remind me.” He wanted to spit the words in spite, but he knew from experience that course was pointless.

She gave a curt nod and continued to seat herself as coffee was brought to her.

It took her clearing her throat for him to realise he stood, frozen to the spot, caught up in his thoughts. He took his own chair and picked over the food placed in front of him.

“Do not squander the opportunity,” Bedelia continued, not looking up from where she poked at her own food.

“I will behave appropriately, I assure you.” Will replied, going through the motions of the conversation.

He wasn’t surprised by her huff in response, but he was by the following words. “If only you *would* act inappropriately.”

“Sorry?” Will frowned and looked at her but she didn’t meet his eyes. She rarely did, because he was beneath her gaze.

“What would I give for a playboy who couldn’t keep it in his pants and who runs through women, but what I have is a son who shows no interest in them.”

Will sucked in a breath, his palms sweating as he set down his knife and fork with shaky hands.

“You thought I didn’t know?” At this Bedelia did look up, a raised brow and sardonic expression. “Your father would be ashamed. If you were his second son, perhaps no one would care. But for a King? It’s not possible. We give up what we want when we want power, believe me I speak from experience.”

She sipped her coffee, the silence hanging heavy between them, as seemed her intent. To discomfit him.

“I gave up a great deal to be the wife of a King. And not even his *first* wife. No, one he could never love. Not whilst he remembered her every day, saw her in your countenance. I gave up on happiness for power. And now you must do the same. Wrestle it to the ground, numb it with ice, but you cannot be what god made you, not if you mean to take his place.”

Her words softened. At least compared to her usual tone. And there was a sense there that she had been so cold to him all these years to harden him to this truth.

Will sucked in a sharp breath, feeling his heart breaking and his mind reeling.

Everything hurt.

“Excuse me,” He muttered quietly, setting down his napkin before rising and leaving the room.

*

Will wasn’t much of a drinker, but he considered getting drunk before leaving his suite and heading down to the ballroom.

Anything to make this time go smoother, quicker.

In the end he settled on a couple of glasses of whiskey as he dressed in the suit Bedelia had picked out for him. One befitting a king, apparently.

Will looked at his reflection for a moment, and maybe she was right. He looked like his father. He would have worn this suit.

Will looked away. Another reminder that he wasn't his father, never would be. Never could be.

It would be so easy to walk away. Bedelia would just continue as she had been. And Will? He could disappear. No one would know. No one would miss him.

Will didn't look back as he strode from his room and out into the hallway. He marched with determination, and eagerness to get this evening over and done with. At least he knew his own home well enough to make his way down to the back of the ballroom, not the main entrance where he'd be welcomed with a fanfare.

He was almost at the ballroom, the doorman holding the door open and the music escaping from within. Will was so focused on getting in, that he didn't see the young woman walking from the side, coming from the bathrooms.

They collided in a soft impact.

"I'm so sorry," Will muttered quietly even as the woman chuckled.

"Oh my god, I really don't belong in this place." The woman continued to chuckle as she looked him up and down. "You clearly do though."

"Unfortunately," Will replied with the first genuine, if slight, smile he'd had in a while. There was something infectiously warm about the young woman. "After you," He indicated the door with his hand and she smiled and gave him a nod.

Will continued in after her and then stopped. He was immediately overwhelmed by the sheer number of people in the room, and all the more thankful he had used a discrete entrance.

"Are you alright?" The woman had turned back to look at him and asked him gently.

He took in a breath and then gave a slow nod, "Yes. It's just a lot of people." A huge weight of expectation.

When she looked at him with concern, he pulled on the practiced smile he used to greet nobility and the public alike.

The flicker across her face made him wonder if she could see how fake it was. But all the same she smiled back.

She held out her hand for him to shake, and he did so, delicately.

"I'm not entirely sure how these things are done. But I assume we should be acquainted?"

He's mouth tweaked up at the corner again.

“I’m Will-”

“A pleasure to meet you, Your Highness.” The woman’s smile was more a smirk and Will found he enjoyed it.

“And you, Miss?”

“It really isn’t done this way is it?” She laughed, “Not being formally introduced. I’m sure this is against all sorts of protocol.”

“Indeed,” Will confirmed, “The Queen would have a fit, but I don’t expect such a ceremony.”

“Margot Verger,” She replied with a smile.

He knew the name of course. Her family was not so secretly whispered about. New money, and a fortune from pig farming, was enough to gall all those who forgot that their own families had made money in often worse ways before the fall of the States.

“A pleasure,” Will told her, placing his other hand over the top of their joined ones and giving a slight bow as she mirrored with a curtsy. “Um, would you like to dance?”

“Your Highness!” Margot feigned shock, pulling back a hand to clutch at imaginary pearls. “I have to tell you I didn’t come here seeking a husband.”

“Neither did I,” Will replied with a slight blush, that only grew as he realised what he’d said.

Margot’s smile grew wide, something genuine and excited. “We’ll get along just fine then,” She said, taking his arm and starting towards the dancefloor before he could do much about it.

Not that he wanted to.

*

The evening drew to a close all too soon.

With every few dances spent in the company of Margot Verger, the event was much more bearable. He obliged in the dances with other women of Bedelia’s choosing and then would return to dance or sit with Margot.

Will hadn’t been unaware of the glances from everyone in the room. Least of all the polite expression on Bedelia’s face that Will knew was a mask, hiding her horror. But he didn’t care.

He had made his first and only friend, and that was something he had never considered as the woman chattered happily about the lowly origins of her family. The way she detested pig farming and herself did not eat meat. And she spoke of a woman she adored as something other than a sister.

Will even started to entertain the idea that Margot Verger was someone he could marry. A shared secret, a shared pain. But he wasn’t sure he could do that to her. After all, she might be able to still defy the expectations of her family and run off with the woman she so clearly loved.

Those thoughts still swirled in his tipsy mind hours after the party had ended. Will was starting to doze on the sofa in the study. His tie unfastened and his eyes bleary from the few too many drinks

he'd had.

It was the sound of the door closing firmly that woke him fully.

"What on earth are you thinking, William?" Bedelia's words came with a mirthless and mocking chuckle. "She will make you as good a wife as any, I suppose. The daughter of a pig farmer that bought his title is better than your current perversion."

Her tone was one of disappointment and it made him sick to his stomach.

"Don't look at me like that, your highness," She scalded him. "Marry her before she realises what you are. Have heirs and she will be grateful, I'm sure." Her words dripped with sarcasm and made his skin crawl.

Will clenched his jaw and rose, his head spinning. He stalked from the room, down the hallways, picking up speed. Finally he pushed through the doors, out into the cold night air.

He didn't look back as he ran from the house, from his life. Out onto the wet grass of the gardens that stood on the ground of what had been Unity Hall.

The Queen had insisted that the seat of power be moved to this broken city. Under the boot of her military might, it had been rebuilt to her standards. And now they lived there, a home not his own, one conquered. There was something about it that had always made him sick to his stomach.

The memory of seeing his own father and then King Hannibal fall in bullets and blood made his stomach turn.

Will stumbled over the little clumps of thicker grass. No planned direction. He just needed to escape.

Maybe forever?

The Queen's words were still ringing in his ears as he ran from the palace, too numb for tears to even flow. He couldn't go on like this.

He couldn't live like this.

It wasn't until he reached the palace's expansive lake that he realised he hadn't meant to stop. But stop he did, pausing to look at his reflection before setting his mind on the course of action. It would be so simple a thing to wade out and submerge, to sink and let the water take him.

So easy.

Will stepped forward, a foot submerging, his boot leaking instantly so that his foot was wet and cold. A new numbness. He was about to continue when a flash of something in the moonlight caught his eye.

He had chanced to see the swans upon this lake over the years as they seemingly patrolled in and out of the view of the palace. But this one in particular Will knew. A shy creature and yet the only one that ventured forward where the other swans remained at the far side of the lake that disappeared into wilderness.

The moonlight shone on the white feathers, making it glow, like something enchanted and pure. Will was mesmerised as it swam closer and closer.

It was larger than he imagined it might be, and he found himself reaching out a hand as though the creature might come to him.

And it did, quick and precise, the swan reared and flapped its wings, hissing as though it made to chase Will off. Will startled and fell back, the one foot now lodged in the water as he ended up flat on his back on the bank with the swan advancing on him. More fierce than any dog he'd ever seen.

And yet Will wasn't afraid.

"You cannot hurt me, I don't feel pain anymore," Will told the swan as it grew close. At his words it froze, as though it might actually understand him. It shook out its feathers and returned to it's elegant stance, gracefully turning on the water though his eyes remained focused on Will.

It came nearer, ever decreasing circles and eyes never leaving Will's.

As it approached, Will found his heart racing, and it wasn't fear.

It wasn't fear that caught his breath. It was the great sense of power the animal possessed, the magic it seemed to exude.

He scrambled back up the bank, losing his boot in the process, as he tried to keep a distance. Or tried to lure it? He wasn't sure what his intent was as he reacted on instinct alone.

Lure, definitely lure, he realised as it approached the bank and it's wings went wide again. Will wanted to touch the power before him. Wanted to understand it and feel it, wanted that power for himself even if it meant feasting on the creature's heart.

He held out his hands as it loomed. It rose from the water, a flurry of feathers as its wings beat, closer and closer until he was hitting Will, sharp stinging slaps that had Will raising his arms to protect himself. But then the beating receded and there was nothing but white before him, feathers filling his entire range of vision before they too began to recede. Drawing back, drawing tight to a body until it was no longer swan and they were no longer feathers. Until it was a man with the same reddish eyes piercing him and pale skin looming over him.

Moonlight making him glow. He was a god. Naked and glowing, his skin almost as white as the swan as though he had never been out in sunlight.

Will took in a sharp breath.

The man glowered down at him, breathing heavily. His whole body moved with each breath, swelling like the ebb and flow of water.

"Are you going to kill me?" Will asked, doubting his sanity. Surely this was death coming for him?

The man reached down a hand and Will hesitated for only a moment before he reached back and took it.

"W-who are you?" Will asked, breathless as he was gently pulled to his feet as though he weighed nothing at all.

The man didn't speak, pulling Will easily up into his grasp, holding him even as Will found his feet.

Righted and stable, Will should probably have pulled away, but he didn't. There was something about the intense gaze of the enigmatic man that held him there.

Will should have been scared, but he was simply intrigued.

Will should have run. The man just came out of nowhere. Or had been a swan?

Had he been a swan?

That part was becoming blurry. All Will knew was that he was being held by strong arms that no longer needed to hold him but continued to do so.

Will swallowed, "I asked who you are?"

The man moved fluidly as he stepped back, releasing Will from his grasp as he glided back towards the water. More than glided, danced.

"Wait!" Will cried out and clasped hold of the man's arm.

He wanted to know who the man was, but more than that, he didn't want the man to go. He didn't want to lose that gaze and for their slight embrace to end.

Will's heart thundered in his chest as the other man stilled and looked down at where Will had taken hold of his pale, cool flesh.

Gently, the man's fingers took hold of Will's hand, pulling it from his arm, and Will into another embrace. When the man moved Will glided with him towards the water.

This truly had to be death coming for him. Perhaps he was already dead?

And Will welcomed it.

At least this ending would be full of beauty.

Will closed his eyes.

And then he was moving, held in strong arms and being guided around. After a moment Will realised what the movements were and found his own feet.

They danced in a way Will had never danced before. The same steps and moves he had learned many years ago and even enacted earlier that evening, but with a man it felt so different. It felt right.

His heart thundered in his chest as they skirted the edge of the water, never quite stepping into it. The man was leading him, something new. He had always been the leader when dancing, as was the expectation, but now as the follower he was swooped around, feeling like he was the sole focus of the man's attention.

He had never felt like that before. And he was absolutely sure he'd never made a dance partner feel this way either. The thought reminded him of Margot and everything that had led to this moment,

and he found himself holding tighter to the man.

In response he was pulled closer, their bodies pressed together as they continued to move, and then they reached the edge of the lake again and stopped abruptly.

Will was panting from both the exertion and his proximity to this enigmatic man, even though he seemed totally composed. Which made Will all the more flustered.

“I apologise, it has been a long time since I’ve had an opportunity to dance with a human partner.” The words were raspy and low.

Will drew in a sharp breath at the unexpected words as the man released him.

Trying to compose himself, Will stepped slightly away.

“I’m Will. Would you please tell me who you are?”

“The Prince?” The man asked, his voice a low rumble that made him shiver.

Will hesitated before nodding, as the man’s eyes narrowed.

The man turned and began to walk back into the lake. He was up to his knees by the time Will pulled himself together and reacted, following after him.

When he took hold of the man’s arm, he stopped and turned to look at Will.

“Please, who are you?”

With no effort, the man pulled from his grasp and began to move quickly forward, changing with each step until he was once more a swan swimming out to the middle of the lake.

It had to be a dream, a hallucination. Perhaps Will really had too much to drink? Perhaps he was having a breakdown? Swans did not routinely turn into humans, much less dance with him and make his heart beat so hard that it almost burst from his chest.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Is this madness or reality?

"Father, no!" Prince Hannibal called out, screaming for his father even as the guards pulled him away from his family.

"We must go, your highness."

"I am no longer a child, you cannot tell me what to do." Hannibal growled as he tried to pull away.

"These are you father's orders, sir." There was regret there but the guard pulled Hannibal away nonetheless. When they reached the side door of the building, they piled out into the waiting SUV as the sound of the front doors coming down boomed through the building.

Hannibal tried to look back through the tinted windows, but then his head was forced down, a bodyguard covering him as bullets hit the side of the vehicle. The SUV shook as the driver put his foot down, pulling away so fast that the engine groaned.

"Where are we going?" Hannibal struggled, "What about Mischa?"

Not having thought this week was any different to any other, she had been on a school trip with her class. And now he was left with no idea as to where she was and if she was safe. The thought filled him with both dread and panic.

"We have to go back." Hannibal growled, and pushed back against the bodyguard.

"Eagle is down." A voice broke over the radio and the bodyguard in the front seat spat a curse.

He grabbed the radio, "Confirm?"

"The king is dead. Confirmed, fuck… It's all… We've been overwhelmed. He's fucking dead-" The voice cut out on the other end and became white noise.

"No," Hannibal muttered, the word painfully stuck in his throat.

"Fuck," The driver slammed his hands on the steering wheel and then pulled it around tight. So tight that for a moment Hannibal feared they were going to roll.

"Are we going back?" Hannibal asked.

"No." Came the abrupt answer. Streets flew past and he could see they were still heading into the city, just another area.

"Take me back! My mother, Mischa. I have to see they are-"

“No,” The bodyguard in the front turned and spoke to him sharply, and Hannibal was shocked by the direct tone. “We have our orders.”

“From my father,” Hannibal protested. “If he’s dead then you have no orders.”

“I’m sorry sir,” The bodyguard tried to gentle his words but there was still a growl in them. “But in fact, our orders have changed and these are specifically in the case of your father’s death. We have orders for the preservation of his line.”

“What?!” Hannibal reeled. The throne his father had created was not hereditary. He knew his father hoped that one day he might prove himself worthy to be next in line, but that was not the current contingency. Not that any of that mattered now that his father had been overthrown.

“We have our orders.” The man barked and looked dead ahead, clearly no intent to discuss further.

“No,” Hannibal growled. In a swift motion he unbuckled his seatbelt and tried to open the door. But it thunked with the child lock. And a moment later Hannibal was slammed back against the chair before a blow came to his head.

Everything went dark.

Present

“William,” Though pleasant, there was a scolding in Bedelia’s tone, “I think we both said some things yesterday that we might regret. But I will be firm in this, the Verger girl is not a prospect for you.”

Will looked up from his breakfast plate and blinked, taking her in as she walked to her own seat and sat down. Calm, collected.

Not as Will felt. In fact he wouldn’t have even pulled himself from his bed had he not felt that it would just cause more trouble if he didn’t rise.

He had sat by the lake until almost dawn, watching and waiting until finally returning to his room and passing out with exhaustion. His mind was still trying to process everything he’d seen, everything he’d felt. But for now he knew all he could do was pretend. To carry on as though nothing had happened.

When he didn’t reply, Bedelia continued.

“There’s someone I want you to meet. Her name is Alana Bloom and she is one of the new political favourites, recently became a Minister. A challenge, but someone who would keep you on your toes. She would be good for you. I dare say you would benefit from a wife who has policial nounce.” Bedelia spoke as though she were suggesting what he might have for dinner, not a potential wife. She didn’t look at him as she stirred her morning coffee.

“Would I have met her last night?” Will asked, trying to sound like the obedient son she expected, even as his mind continued to try and pull him back to the lake. To that place where he was himself and would not have to marry any woman.

At his words her spoon clattered down onto her saucer, making the staff jump.

Her voice shook with controlled anger as she replied, “She could not attend. However, I believe that her presence would have made little difference as you were preoccupied. With the daughter of a pig farmer, if I recall.” She turned a steely glare on him and Will looked down at his food.

Will placed down his fork and sighed, “I think I need some fresh air.”

“William.” Bedelia growled as he stood up and pushed in his chair.

He didn’t look back as he left the room and walked out towards the lake.

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When Will sat next to the lake he felt alive.

Invigorated, as though on the verge of something. And wanting more. More of the swan that is a man and more of the feeling that came with his touch. It was all consuming. It was happiness and hope.

It was the very reason he returned everyday, sitting and watching and waiting until it was all the staff could gossip about. More oddness from the strange young prince.

“Penny for them?”

Will looked up at the unfamiliar voice to see a beautiful brunette staring down at him. She had a warm smile and clasped her hands in front of her whilst waiting patiently for a response. When he didn’t reply, she continued sweetly.

“I was told I would find you here. The Regent said that you’ve been spending your days next to the lake, that you have a fondness for the fresh air.” She smiled warmly even as Will frowned.

As Will started to get to his feet to welcome her properly, as he should, she waved him to stay and then took a moment in her heels and fancy dress suit, to lower herself to sit down next to him on the bank.

“You seemed lost in thought. I’m sorry to disturb you. My name is Alana Bloom, and-”

“Ah yes, Bedelia wanted us to meet.” Will tried to keep the edge from his voice but her expression said he didn’t quite manage it. He cleared his throat and held out his hand to shake, “Minister Bloom.”

“Your Highness,” She returned with a smile and shook his hand. “It’s very pleasant here. I can see the appeal.”

“Yes,” Will hummed, looking back out to the lake. The swans were swimming on the farside, as they often did. It was impossible to get there so he was sure they did so in order to avoid people. It was impossible to see if *his* swan was amongst them.

“I’ll come to the point,” The Minister said gently, “The Regent sees us as a match, and I’m not in a position to argue. Moreover, it would be an... advantageous move for me.” Her words trailed a little and Will looked at her.

“To further your career.” He stated and her lips tightened.

“Amongst other things. I guess you could say I’m in need of a husband. And the Regent believes that you’re in need of a politically savvy wife.” Her smile is meant to comfort, Will can tell. And there *is* something comforting about her. He can imagine she would make both an excellent politician and a wonderful mother.

“I’m not looking for a wife.” Will muttered, knowing it was pointless to argue but wanting to express it nonetheless.

“And I am not looking for a husband,” She replied. When he cocked a brow at her she replied, “In the biblical sense. But I hear from a mutual friend that such an arrangement might be welcoming to you.”

Will blinked, taking in her words and feeling his chest tighten. She knew, or at least suspected. And he had been so careful. The only person he’d ever even allowed to suspect was-

“Margot?” Will drew in a sharp breath.

“Yes,” Alana looked around subtly, as though to make sure they wouldn’t be overheard. “She is the reason I told the Regent I’d be happy to come meet with you out here, rather than having you brought in. She’s the reason I agreed to meet with you after having initially turned down the ball invite.”

Will let out a bark of laughter. “If I’m honest, I assumed that the woman she wanted to run away with was a maid or… I don’t know. I didn’t imagine a politician.”

“Perhaps many can’t imagine it of the Prince either.” She refuted, but her tone was good natured and soft. “We can protect each other this way. If you’ll allow it.”

Will looked at her and then back out over the lake, feeling a deep longing to see that man again. To see him now and know this wasn’t all in his head. To hope that he could guide Will in some way.

“You don’t need to decide anything right now.” She followed up hurriedly. “The Regent has expressed that you might take time to decide and she has invited me to the Masque on Saturday evening. I, um,” Alana hesitated and then continued, “I got the impression that she expects us to have an answer for her that evening.”

Will nodded, “Yes, I expect so.”

“Your Highness,” Alana spoke gently again, “Will. It *is* worth considering.”

Will turned to her and gave a slight smile and a nod. “I’ll think about it.” He promised.

She returned the smile fondly and got back to her feet, “Until then.”

Will went to get to his feet and she waved him off, but all the same he said, “It was nice to meet you Minister.”

She gave a soft smile and slight curtsy, “Your Highness,” and then turned and walked back to the house.

Will let out a sigh and looked back over at the water. She was right, it could be a beneficial match for all of them. Perhaps even give him some freedoms he didn’t have as he lived now.

But was it enough? It was still not freedom, not really. Though it might be as close as he would ever get. He didn't wish to be king, and the fact was Bedelia didn't want him to be either. Even when his coronation came, she'd likely still hold the power of the throne. He would still be trapped one way or the other. Being trapped with Alana and Margot, knowing each other's secret as they did, could be better.

Even so, as he looked over at the water, his heart ached.

"I wish I could see you again." He muttered quietly.

Will sat there, watching, for the rest of the day and into the evening. As the sun set and the moon rose, he hoped the swan would return to him. He wanted to feel again what he had felt when the man held him in his arms.

But the swans did not come, and the man did not appear. Not that night or any of the others as the week progressed.

*

"What are you wearing?" Bedelia asked, shocked by the unexpected outfit. She had let herself into his room a moment before and now came over to adjust his collar as he stood in front of the mirror.

She was dressed in a beautiful fitted gown in a deep blue with gold accents, looking every inch a queen. His own suit was supposed to have been fashioned after something more historical, as was his mask. It was as daring as he'd wished to go, knowing the other people might dress as animals and even trees or elves. It was always an excuse for people to go wild in their own way.

And at the last minute, he had decided to go wild himself.

"I changed my mind. Francois was able to find a new mask and adjust my-"

"A goose?" Bedelia rolled her eyes at him.

"No, not a goose." He replied, a bit more bite in his tone than she'd expected from him, as was clear from her raised brow.

He turned back to the mirror. Most of his costume was as it should have been. Pale britches, a flouncy white shirt, but he no longer wore a jacket, and his vest was now a beautiful cream with subtle accents that in the right light were feathers. Rather than a blue mask that would have matched the previously intended vest, he now wore one in the matching cream, all but for the black accents that marked it as a swan.

Will wasn't sure what had possessed him to have these changes hurriedly made only twenty-four hours before. Maybe he wanted to embody that feeling the man on the lake had given him? Maybe he wanted to channel some of that grace and that confidence?

Maybe he simply wanted to feel close to something even as he took this step into the inevitable life that lay ahead of him and away from what he truly wanted. For tonight there was no fighting it, he had to agree to take Alana Bloom as his wife.

"Well, as long as you're presentable. And attentive!" Bedelia warned him, and then she turned on her heel and left him to pull down his mask and look at his reflection in the mirror.

He'd heard the lecture many times in the last few days. That Minister Bloom was her preferred option, his only option really. And he could see through it well enough. Bedelia hoped the Minister would be power hungry enough to kowtow to her as everyone else did. Perhaps even after his coronation.

Will knew she thought him weak willed and malleable, that it would be easy to essentially remain in power even once she was no longer Regent.

And he might have suspected the same about the Minister, had she not given him the truth of her and Margot. Will had to smile at that, she would hardly be as much of a pusher over Bedelia hoped or wanted.

Will was still smiling when he looked back to the mirror, lowering his mask, deep black just like a swan.

His heart fluttered, a vision in front of him. Perhaps when this night was over he would go back out to the lake and the man would return on seeing him like this?

Will let out a maudlin sigh.

By the time the evening had started, Will was down in the ballroom, a dutiful son and Prince.

He greeted the guests as they arrived, at least until Minister Bloom came in. Bedelia made it very clear that whilst he should be polite enough to dance with others, he must pay Alana attention above all others.

"Your Highness," Alana greeted him with a smile. "Great minds perhaps? I saw how you admired the lake."

Will's smile was forced as he took in her almost balletic costume, she wore more prominent feathers than he did, but not enough to br garish. Just enough to look like a black swan.

He wanted to appreciate her sentiment, and perhaps Bedelia would be very pleased and amused to see they near matched. At least Will was somewhat comforted by the fact that amongst the others dressed as animals there were some other birds. A parrot, a duck and several non-descript costumes that were simply feathered and coupled with beaked masks.

As such they didn't quite stand out, but enough eyes were drawn to them that Will felt uncomfortable.

"A drink?" Alana suggested, reminding Will how these functions worked.

"Yes, of course," He forced a smile, trying not to let his discomfort show as Alana took two drinks from a passing tray. She gave him a sympathetic smile and he wondered if maybe he could marry her. Perhaps she and Margot could understand him enough for it to work. All live together and no one would know that the true marriage was between Alana and Margot. It was a solution for all of them.

He sipped at his drink, taking a furtive glance around the room and noting that they didn't have quite so many people's attention anymore. He let out a sigh and was about to turn back to Alana when he saw heads turning towards the grand double doors into the ballroom.

Will's breath caught in his throat as he watched the man gliding through the room.

A swan. Pure white, whiter than anything Will was wearing, if anything the Prince was now nothing more than a poor copy. An ugly duckling.

Chatter started up and Will wondered how many people were agreeing with this thought. There were enough disgruntled murmurs for Will to catch a few sentiments that the new swan should go home and not upstage the prince in such a way.

At that Will wanted to laugh, as much as he gave a fig. But he couldn't. He was frozen, his entire focus narrowing in on the graceful image before him.

And then the man turned to look his way and what Will already knew in his heart was confirmed. Despite the elegant swan mask, far superior to his own, the curve of his lips made clear that this was the man from the lake.

When their eyes locked the room grew still. Will wasn't sure how much of it was imagined and how much of it was real. Did everything just stop? Was everyone watching them? Either way, it didn't matter, he found himself slowly walking forward, drawn and unable to stop himself.

"Your Highness?" He heard Alana say softly, but she didn't move to stop him. "Will," she continued in a sterner tone, concern there. And of course she was right to be concerned. She cleared her throat and slid her hand into the crook of his arm. "Do introduce me to your friend."

Will stopped and looked at Alana, blinking. He read her expression perfectly, and understood that Bedelia was right about needing such a wife. Even if not for the reasons she believed. Will might have just made a grave error, and she prevented it.

The room seemed to fill with noise again. Music, chatter, glasses clinking.

And Will tried to retain a semblance of propriety as he led Alana to the man and then came to a stop.

The way the man looked at him, the intensity, it made Will shiver. Will felt like the man's hands were on him again, could remember the sensation and how it made him feel.

"I'm glad to see you again," Will said and then waited.

He could feel his heart pound in his chest two, three times, before the man replied.

The man bowed very slightly and held out his hand.

Will hesitated before reaching out to shake it. He swallowed, and his eyes went wide as the man's warm hand grasped his own. It felt electric, a connection running between them that made his whole body come alive.

They were both still for a moment, hands linked longer than they needed to be or should have been. And only when Alana politely cleared her throat did Will withdraw his hand.

"Forgive me," Will muttered, "I do not know your name."

"Olor," The man replied before turning a low bow to Alana before turning back to Will. "I wished to see you again, Prince."

Will trembled at the low rumble of words, glad of the music and dancing that had picked up around them so that the interaction was not witnessed. Though he was sure that Bedelia had an eye on him this very moment and watched with cool disdain.

He was sure to turn a smile to Alana and pat her hand, performative, and Alana knew it.

She was the one that turned back to the man and held out her hand, “A pleasure, Mister Olor. Minister Alana Bloom.” She introduced herself and then paused, looking at him for a moment and then cocked her head, “Have we met before? You seem familiar.”

“I do not believe so,” He replied with a purr and lifted her hand to his lips. Whilst he gently kissed the back of Alana’s hand, his eyes did not leave Will’s.

The moment was broken by the sound of Bedelia’s voice.

“I don’t believe we have been introduced,” Her tone was sharp and the pleasantness put on, as she came to a halt next to Will, inserting herself just enough that she effectively blocked the two men.

“Regent, this is Mister Olor,” Will told her quickly, too quickly.

He didn’t miss the way Bedelia smirked and then she took Olor’s hand and waited for him to kiss hers too, which he did.

“A true gentleman should know when a lady is in want of a dance partner.” She said, a forced amusement in her tone.

All the same Olor’s eyes went to her and then he gave a curt nod, “Of course.”

He offered Bedelia his arm and then they turned and walked into the throng of dancers.

Will let out a breath he didn’t realise he’d been holding and Alana was squeezing his arm tight.

“That was intense,” She breathed, letting out an uncomfortable chuckle.

Will blinked and turned to her, into the comfort she offered. It was strange how instantly he had felt reassured by her and now, in just these few minutes, it felt like she was the strongest ally he’d ever known. The only one.

“Come on, Will.” She urged, leading him towards a table at the edge of the ballroom’s dancefloor, and he went. And sat. And watched as Bedelia danced dance after dance with man from the lake.

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Initially Alana had urged him to dance, knowing that appearances must be kept up as suredly as she suspected that there was something between Will and Olor.

But also knowing that in order to not cause the same ill feelings he had at the last ball, he should dance with others too. Be polite, offer himself around, but then return to Alana to make clear their intent.

And so Will did, solemnly, as Bedelia took great pains to ensure Olor was enraptured with her and her own alone.

As he stole glances it became clear to Will that Olor was just as enraptured with Bedelia. They danced so gracefully together and people gasped and smiled as he dipped her. They talked and laughed, and with every turn Will felt like his heart was being ripped out of his chest.

Will tried his best to focus on each partner in turn, but it was impossible to ignore Olor and Bedelia. Nor the people at the edges of the ballroom conspiratorially gossiping with each other. Wondering who was this man that had so bewitched the Regent?

Will was taking another turn with Alana when it all became a little much, too intense. Alana gazed at him with concern and there it seemed plain to her how much pain he was in. He knew then that Alana and Margot would always understand that pain.

“Shall we get some fresh air, I’m finding it a little warm in here.” Alana said with an easy smile. Will’s own smile was grateful and he nodded.

“Yes, that sounds good.”

They were almost off the dancefloor when they crossed paths with the starry eyed dancers. Whilst Bedelia was lost in Olor’s eyes, the man’s eyes suddenly fell to Will.

There was something there, that connection, and Will knew the man could see his pain. But in a moment that look was gone and he turned back to Bedelia with an enchanting smile, leaning in close to her to whisper something amusing in her ear. And then her eyes fell on Will and he was sure that he was the subject of that amusement.

Will rushed from the dancefloor and out onto the terrace that overlooked the grounds, and in the distance, the lake. Seeing it there made Will shudder.

“Will!” Alana was beside him in an instant, a hand resting on his arm. It seemed like she might say something but there was nothing but silence, and he needed that.

They both stood at the parapet, looking out with the sound of the party behind them and the sound of chirping night crickets in front of them, her hand still on his arm.

“This is a beautiful place.” Alana said, softly.

Will nodded, “I suppose it can be.” He didn’t want to add that it never had been for him, and he wondered how much so it had been for the previous occupants, now all long dead. He assumed at least, the Prince and Princess were never recovered, but with the King and Queen dead, there had been no one to challenge Bedelia as she took control of the lands as Regent in his father’s name.

“Your Highness,” The deep but soft voice that came from behind them felt like a caress and Will had to hold himself from shivering with desire and shaking with anger.

“I… think I need some water, after all the exertion.” Alana gave Will a reassuring smile, and headed back into the ballroom.

Will turned to see it was only he and Olor on the terrace. They gazed at each other for a long moment.

He cleared his throat, “I remember my latin classes well enough to know your name. Mister Swan.” Will spat the words and shook his head. He added quietly, unsure whether the man could even hear,

not that it mattered. “Are you even real? Are you just here to torment me with something I can never have?”

The man didn’t respond, simply continued to gaze at Will.

And then he stepped forward.

And Will stepped back. He backed into the dark corner of the terrace, furthest from the party, further into the darkness and under the moonlight.

When Will’s back hit the terrace wall, he had nowhere else to go. Nowhere else he wanted to be as the man advanced on him, prowling towards him more like a cat than a swan.

When they were toe to toe, the man stopped and closed his eyes, leaning in. They weren’t quite touching but he could feel the man’s heat as he could no doubt feel Will’s. Smell the scent of each other. Will’s aftershave and Olor’s delicate scent of bulrushes and freshwater.

“What’s your name?” Will asked, almost a whisper, breathless. A plea.

“Come with me,” The man held out his hand and Will stared at it for a moment.

“I… I can’t. My duty…” Will ached to say it. But then that ache turned to anger as he remembered the evening. He turned away as he spat, “Perhaps you should go back to wooing the Regent.”

Will gasped when a hand landed softly at his nape, fingers as light as feathers caressed over his collar and then down his spine. Will’s breath caught and came out as a shudder, wanting to melt into the sensation. Wanting to feel the touch even more keenly.

Will turned quickly, despite everything he wanted to throw himself into the man’s arms. But he was gone.

*

Will felt frantic.

His throat and eyes hurt from holding in the tears that desperately threatened to betray all his weaknesses.

There was no way back from the terrace without going through the ballroom. He had to leave, he had to get out of this place, and-

Will started to run through the ballroom, not caring for the ruckus he was causing, the startled guests and spilled drinks. It was all a blur, all happening external to himself.

He was almost halfway across the neverending room, when he skidded to a halt. Everyone had parted for him except the couple dancing in front of him now, enraptured with each other as they had been all evening.

“Will, what is the meaning of all this,” Bedelia snapped at him as the music stopped and so did she. Every guest watched, entertained one way or the other, as the Prince stood shaking before the Regent and the mysterious stranger who now wrapped a possessive arm around her.

“You take everything from me,” Will screamed at her. He knew he sounded like a petulant child, and to all like a spoiled Prince, he was sure. But no, she had. She had taken his father, then the kingdom and now this. He hadn’t even meant to say the words, or confront her at all, but the amusement that danced in her eyes at his outburst made him all the angrier.

“You should not speak to the Regent that way,” The stranger spoke coolly and murmuring arose around the room at his defense of the Regent.

“Will,” Alana was at his side again, “Come, Your Highness. You’re tired and not well,” She tried to encourage him away, tried to give him an out. But there was so much despair and anger inside him, years of it just waiting to be set free that an explosion was inevitable.

“No,” Will growled and lunged forward. Bedelia reeled back and the entire room gasped in shock.

Despite not laying a hand on her, she stumbled anyway, caught by Alana who had rushed forward as well.

He grabbed the stranger by the shirt, near throttling him as he shouted, “Are you real? Why are you tormenting me.”

“Unhand me!” The stranger replied, indignant, though he didn’t attempt to break free.

Will shook his head, spreading his hands out across the man’s chest, much to the scandalised murmurs around them. “You were real at the lake weren’t you? You’re real!”

Will leaned in and pressed his lips to the stranger’s.

In a moment he was taken back to the lake in his mind. Taken back to every dark thought he’d had since he had been old enough to understand his own feelings and that they were not allowed.

And for a moment they remained locked together in the chaste kiss. But then Olor pulled back.

“Unhand me!”

The room came back to Will.

As did the cries of scandalised outrage. The room was abuzz and horrified.

The stranger took hold of Will’s wrists and yanked him backwards. But there wasn’t a look of disgust in his eyes, only sorrow.

“You’re real!” Will insisted and lunged forward again, causing another gasp in the crowded room. This time he took hold of the man’s mask and pulled it with him as he stumbled back. It came away easily, and yes. Yes. It was the man from the lake, the swan. The beautiful creature that had given form to Will’s feelings. Those dangerous, forbidden feelings.

They stood staring at each other and there was something in the stranger’s eyes that Will could not read.

And then the chance was lost.

The sound of heavy boots filled the room. Will laughed, hysterical as the Regent’s Guard surrounded him. Hands were on him, digging into his arms as he was pulled back.

The room was filled with sensationalised wonder as the people watched the hysterical prince being dragged away.

Will simply laughed, defeated.

He looked to the stranger, his eyes soft and pleading Will to understand… something. Something he couldn't decipher.

He looked to Bedelia, who feigned aghast injury even as she smirked at him. No doubt delighted with the strange outcome to this evening and what it might mean for her and her position.

And then his gaze fell on Alana.

But she wasn't looking at Will. With teary eyes she stared at the stranger. So intently that Will studied her just as deeply as he was pulled towards the grand doors. And just before he was dragged out of the room and away from them all, he saw her mutter just one word in wonder.

"Hannibal."

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

It seems things will get worse before they get better.

Hannibal gasped in a deep breath as he woke, eyes trying to focus as he looked around him, trying to get his bearings.

When he attempted to move his arms and legs, he found he was strapped down. In the dim medical lighting he started to regain focus. He had no idea where he was and he was terrified. There was a slight burning sensation under his skin, as though his veins had poison in them, coursing around his body.

“Lay still, lay still.” Came a gentle voice and then a slightly brighter light went on and a person dressed in scrubs appeared next to the bed. She began checking instrument readouts and a drip that was hooked up to his arm.

“Did the car crash?” Hannibal asked, his voice rough and throat dry.

“Oh, oh no. Not at all. We just felt it best to keep you sedated when we started the procedure.” She replied as she began to check his vitals.

“Where am I?” Hannibal asked, starting to struggle against his bonds.

“Please, or I’ll have to sedate you again.” The woman replied and rested a hand on his shoulder.

Breathing hard, Hannibal stilled at the threat. “I just want-” He was about to say his mother, his father, but everything came back to him.

He sobbed, helpless and terrified, feeling suddenly young and vulnerable in a way he hadn’t for many years.

A door opened and then a man’s voice asked, “Is he ready?”

She looked up and nodded, “Yeah, he’s in good shape.”

“What’s happening?” Hannibal asked, this time a little more forcefully, tramping down the fear.

A figure loomed over him and as he leaned closer he came into focus. Hannibal recognised the man from Unity Hall. He was sure they’d never met, but he’d had meetings with the King.

“Your Highness,” He greeted softly. “My name is Doctor Chilton, I was asked by your father to consult on a project he wished to invest in. The expectation had been that should your family come under threat, we would have an option for protection.” He looked up and nodded, at which the nurse began to inject something into his IV.

“I don’t understand-”

“The King’s orders were clear. In the event of a threat to his family, they should be brought here to undergo this procedure. To ensure the longevity of his line. He paid a great deal of money to ensure this regardless of his own survival. You’re the only one of your family we were able to recover.”

“I… don’t understand…” Hannibal replied, foggy and slurring. He looked up at the IV, wondering what it was working its way through his system.

“It’s a form of splicing. We’ve run several successful human trials and are very confident it will live up to your father’s expectations. The effects are long lasting but not permanent.”

Hannibal tried to take in the words as his eyelids started to droop. Still not really understanding what was being said. He tried to speak, to ask again but his mouth felt soft and he couldn’t form the words.

“In seven months or so this will just seem like a distant dream.” The doctor told him with a soothing voice.

Present

He blinked awake, aware of the presence next to him in the stables where he had been making his bed the last week or so. Ever since the ball he found he’d been unable to return to swan form and he no longer needed to. He simply needed to remain close to the palace and continue his now daily calls on the Regent.

“Who’s there.” He asked, more of an order really. He only hoped that it wasn’t someone very close to the Regent, as it might raise suspicion if he had to dispatch someone obvious.

“Hello, Olor.” The voice was soft as the woman stepped from the shadows and into the small blade of light that came through the slatted window.

“Minister Bloom,” He recognised having been introduced to her at the ball. She was the young woman betrothed to the man he wanted as his own, but had to use all the same. Perhaps she had come to confront him?

“It took me a few days to find where you had gone, and I wasn’t surprised that you were not far from Unity Hall.” There was a cool calculation to her voice that reminded him of his father.

“And now you have found me. Do you plan on revealing my presence?”

She chuckled lightly and shook her head. “No, I believe we could help one another and that we have a common goal.” She mused as she loomed over him.

He cocked his head, “You believe so?”

“Yes,” She replied with an eager smile.

*

Hannibal looked at his reflection, still one he was adjusting to.

It had been so long since he'd seen his true self for any consistent period of time, and in anything other than the rippled reflection offered by the lake. Now he had chance to study himself, he could see how much he had aged.

When he had first met the young man next to his lake, and realised him to be Will Graham, it had been a shock. When he had last heard of King William's family, Prince Will had been nothing more than a boy, ten years his junior. And now he was a man on the cusp of coronation, and of age with Hannibal. Or the Hannibal that had been before he had become something else.

Ten years, was that how long had passed?

He recalled little but agony of the days it had taken to carry out the procedure the doctor had said would wear off in months. And once it was over and he lay there in a sterile room no longer himself, he recalled words as though a distant dream.

They would take him somewhere he would be safe, where no one would think to look for him, whilst his father's government was purged. When they least expected it, the King's son would return to smite them with those loyal at his back.

Hannibal had no say in this. As in life he would be no more than his father's pawn for political gain. The dutiful son and the heir to a throne his father had created.

He had no say in the mutilation and mutation of his body. He had lain there trying to grow accustomed to breathing through a beak, and to hearing the sounds that came forth when he tried to speak.

"This isn't permanent," The Doctor reassured, running a hand down Hannibal's long neck and admiring his handiwork. "The human body will eventually reject the splicing. Human cells will replicate as they should and with time your body will revert. We will return you here and assist the process to ensure no phasing between forms. We wouldn't want you ending up half man, half swan."

Hannibal felt the unintentional lie of those words now as he looked in the mirror of the guestroom the Regent had placed him in. Hannibal did not know what had happened to that doctor or anyone else loyal to his father. But no one had come for him. Years had passed and he had been a swan on the lake of his own home, now taken by his father's enemy.

And after a while he had forgotten that anything other than the lake had been his home. He had forgotten about his father, his mother and sister. He had forgotten he was a man except for those rare dreams he had where he woke in a man's body and danced at the edge of the lake.

It was not until the day he danced with the Prince, that he realised those had not been dreams but a fleeting return to who he had once been.

Once he had realised and his human thoughts began to return, so too did his body. More frequently at first until Hannibal was able to grasp hold of it entirely and not let it go. Until, when he thought about returning to swan form, it had become impossible.

Hannibal's lips twitched at his reflection. Strong muscles from years of swimming, a lithe form. He had grown into a powerful man, a man whose father expected vengeance.

A vengeance Hannibal had never been interested in. He was now instead single minded in what he must do.

Something that had come to him in dreams as a swan and haunted him since his return to human form.

Will's presence had brought him back to himself, and with that humanity came the knowledge and purpose. He'd known it from the moment he had understood he was human - that he must find Mischa.

*

"Everything will be alright, Will." A soothing hand went through his hair, damp with sweat.

Will couldn't make out who was speaking, a low and comforting rumble, he leaned in to the touch.

"This won't be forever." The voice was familiar, and it took Will a moment to place it as Olor. Will blinked his eyes open but no one was there.

"Oh, Will." A female voice laced with concern made him open his eyes again, not realising they had once more closed. It felt like only moments had passed but Will found Alana Bloom comfortably sitting next to him.

"Alana," Will choked out her name, the sound echoing off of the walls of the small room. He had never been in this room before but he knew enough to realise that it was one of the sickbay rooms that had been built into Unity Hall. A place to treat minor ailments of those therein rather than them attending a public hospital if it could be avoided.

This room had clearly been disused for some time and the lingering metallic scent made him wonder if it had been used to care for those injured and killed when his father's army took control. It was dark, once white walls were yellowed and there was only a high, obscured window that was intended to give privacy but in reality made it feel all the more like a prison.

It was an unkind room. And now Will was trapped there, half the time strapped to the bed itself as the doctors Bedelia had hired worked through different methods of *help*.

"I'm working on getting you out of here." She smiled gently, dipping her fingers into something on her lap and then applying a cool and wet ointment to his temples. He winced at the sting.

"They electrocuted me." He recalled and Alana nodded. The latest and, so far, worst of the methods they had used.

"A revived use of an archaic practice. You're still in the palace, locked up. The Regent brought a specialist in and they decided this was the treatment for you. For your… deviancy."

He could hear the emotion in her voice, fear, hurt, anger. Not just for him but for herself, Margot, others like them.

What they were, *who* they were was not strictly illegal. There were even some legal protections. But that had rarely applied to the upper echelons of society. Where family and name was everything. Where expectation was heavy that marriages and their resultant offspring were a form

of negotiation and pact. Another archaic practice that his father and all the other kings had tried to instil.

Had there been peace between the two kingdoms, there would likely have been negotiations to seal the peace by marrying Will to Mischa Lecter. What a different life that might have been.

“It won’t always be like this.” Alana whispered the promise. “We will get you well, and convince your step-mother of our affection. We will marry and I will keep you safe. We will change things.”

He wished he had her strength and drive, but he was so tired. His body ached from the exertion of the electrotherapy. He nodded all the same.

“She allowed me to come see if you were cured, I will tell her that you spoke of nothing but your wish to marry me and recover from the strange fever that had overtaken you.” Alana spoke softly but then added with some ire, “I’m sure she will understand what it is to be drawn under someone’s spell. And she will readily believe anything that benefits her.”

“I don’t understand,” Will croaked out the words.

Alana smiled down at him. “Nothing to concern yourself with, darling.” She stroked his hair back from his eyes with real affection. “They won’t come for you again, I’ll ensure that. It will be passed off as an illness, you will be introduced back into public life with me on your arm and no one will dare say a word.”

She leaned in and pressed her lips lightly to his forehead, sisterly affection.

“Everything will be better, I promise.” She said as his eyes began to droop again.

*

“My dear,” Hannibal greeted warmly as he crossed the room and drew Alana into his arms. She clung to him as desperately as he to her. And for long minutes they simply stood, holding each other, so rare these moments were.

It had been many weeks since the Ball and despite seeing her often, they were rarely alone.

Hannibal pulled back and looked down at her with a soft, concerned smile. “How is Will?” He hadn’t dared see the Prince himself. At least not when anyone might notice. He had a few times stolen into Will’s room to watch him sleep and listen to him breathe.

Her expression was pained before she even replied. “He is being broken by their cruelty. They’ve started electroshock therapy.”

Hannibal recoiled at her words. “We have to stop them.”

“We will,” She soothed, rubbing his arm. “But this is a long game. Two games in fact.”

He nodded, understanding her meaning. They were both working towards the same end, one way or another. And she had been playing the game a lot longer than he had, removed as he had been from the world.

He pulled her close again and held her tight for another moment before releasing her. “I am expected by the Regent.”

Alana took in a shaky breath and nodded. It was time for them to put their plans into action, weeks of discussion ready to be enacted. He knew her shiver was equal parts anticipation and fear. So much rode on this for both of them.

“Good luck,” She whispered to him before pressing a kiss to his cheek, letting him go and turning on her heel.

He took in a breath before he too left and made his way to the private room that served as Bedelia’s office.

Hannibal smiled when he saw the Regent. He stalked across the room to her and took her proffered hand in his, pulling it up to press a kiss to the back of it.

“You look enchanting, Regent.” He crooned and looked over her hand into her eyes.

She was too stoic for an obvious blush, but it was clear her cheeks pinked a little at his attention.

He had been wooing her for some weeks now. Charming her and pouring honeyed words into her ear.

“I really will start to insist, you must call me Bedelia in private.” She scolded him.

He smiled and kissed her hand again, this time a little more sensually, tenderly as he smirked suggestively at her, “Of course, Bedelia. Though perhaps I enjoy using your title.”

Her smile was slightly smug and very self-satisfied. Gratified.

He took the seat next to her, pulling her close to continue kissing up her arm. “It is so hard to resist someone as beautiful as they are shrewd. You truly are a wondrous woman.”

“Hmm,” Bedelia hummed, clearly enjoying the flattery and how much she assumed he adored her. “Indeed? And yet I hear that you find Minister Bloom quite captivating.”

Hannibal let out a huff of laugher, “She is a child compared to you.” He reassured with charm, and as she smiled at him he continued, “Although, I do find her very astute. We began speaking about your stepson, she visits him.”

Bedelia raised a brow at that, though not one of surprise. “Yes, I am aware.”

Of course she was.

“I was interested in how he was doing, I feel somewhat responsible for the way he acted. I clearly must have ignited something in him. Perhaps giving an unintentional cue.”

Bedelia’s lips twitched at that and she agreed, “You are rather captivating, Olor.”

Hannibal smiled softly, demure. “I believe Minister Bloom could be very advantageous to you. I gather you looked fondly on their match and it appears she has lost no interest.”

“The Prince is better served where he is,” Bedelia cut him off.

“Of course,” Hannibal bowed his head slightly before meeting her eyes again. “And you will rule well in his place. But there will be those dissenters who would claim your regency should not

extend to outright rule. They might even suggest that you have had the prince removed for your own gain."

"Choose your next words carefully," Bedelia suggested calmly as she studied him.

"I believe that the Minister's wishes and your own align. She seeks position, and the Prince would have been her route to that. And he still could be." Hannibal paused, knowing he'd captured her attention. "If handled carefully this situation could be to everyone's advantage. Release the Prince to his fiance, his indiscretion can be played off as an illness, a fever. Minister Bloom can control him, and in turn you can continue to control the country. He will be ruler in name only, with Bloom as your strongest ally on council."

"She's not on the council." Bedelia replied with narrowed eyes.

"Not yet." Hannibal agreed, he took a breath before continuing, nonchalant. "That decision is of course yours. I am just making the observation that if you made a place for her in your inner circle, she could be your best ally."

Bedelia studied him for a moment, likely wondering if she could trust him. They had only known each other a few weeks, but she had seemed taken with him at the ball and since then he had charmed trust from her. He had led her on and demured time and again, but each time told her it would be all the sweeter when they finally consummated. When it was appropriate to do so and not become the idle gossip of cheap newspapers.

"I wish nothing more than to see you succeed," He added before leaning in and pressing his mouth to hers in a kiss. One less chaste than he had allowed so far, a hand on her knee and a hum on his lips.

"For your own gain, no doubt." She murmured against his lips.

He grinned, "I have made no secret of my aspirations, or my desires."

She ran a hand through his hair and replied "No you have not," before leaning in to kiss him again.

*

When Will woke he had to shield his eyes. The room was bright and white, and it took him a moment to realise he was laid out on a plump, soft mattress with eiderdown duvet rather than the thin sprung mattress and scratchy woolen blankets of the room he had been in.

He hesitated to call it a dungeon, and yet that was how it had seemed.

Will would have thought this a dream or a hallucination if not for the pain.

His whole body ached and he could feel areas where his flesh had been singed. His hair had been shorn, but had begun to grow back. A depressing indictment on the time that had passed. His arms felt like lead and he knew if he looked down he'd see the needle marks of various drugs, multiple blood drawings.

And now that had all stopped? He thought he would die in there, wasting away day by day as they tried to find a cure for what he was.

Will rolled onto his side and curled up in a ball, allowing himself to cry softly into the pillow.

He thought he must have fallen back to sleep when a gentle hand on his back woke him. He startled all the same and winced at the pain that caused.

“I’m sorry,” Alana’s voice soothed. “Lay still, I’ll pour you some water.”

Will moved onto his back, settling in to plump pillows and watched as she did just that, pouring out a glass from the jug that had been left on the side table.

“How are you feeling?” She asked, but her expression showed that she wasn’t expecting a positive response. She smiled comfortingly.

“What’s happening now? Am I cured.” It wasn’t a question and his tone was dark.

Alana passed him the glass and he took it, taking a few sips before handing it back and she placed it down.

She seemed to be collecting her thoughts before she finally took a seat on the edge of his bed and spoke.

“You’re not going back there. But there are conditions.” She took his hand and squeezed it. “The Regent has agreed for us to be married, and that there will be a statement that you had been ill and suffering from a fever, but have now recovered. It will explain your behaviour and disappearance.”

He clenched his jaw, “And then Bedelia retains power, right? I will be found in some way unfit.” The words made his throat ache with emotion, despite the fact that he had never wanted to rule. He even less wanted to see Bedelia take the throne.

There was a part of him, growing every day, that wished his father had not been successful. Wishing they had stayed in their own kingdom and just lived in peace.

If not for the sense of duty instilled by his father he might have run away years ago. Too late for that now.

Alana sighed and then rested her hand on his thigh and gave a comforting squeeze. “Perhaps, but not if I can help it. It will be okay, Will.” She told him softly. “I promise. You’ll be okay.”

“It will be okay, I promise.”

Will woke at the words, looking next to him and realising Alana had gone.

In her place, in the darkness, sat the swan. Now a man. *Olor.*

His hand reached out and was placed, soft and cool, on Will’s brow.

“Rest. I’m taking care of everything.” The man said gently. “Just get better. Once you’re well, things will be different. I promise. And I always keep my promises.”

Will drifted back to sleep with a gentle hand stroking his hair.

*

“How are you?” Abigail Hobbs, the young woman hired to nurse him, drew Will’s curtains for the evening and then came over to help him move from the armchair he’d been sitting in back into the

bed.

He had been in this room for over a month now, and she had taken good care of him, sweet girl that she was. In that time he had seen Bedelia twice, both times they had nothing to say to each other. Alana came every day and once Margot visited as a concerned friend.

Occasionally, he thought he saw the swan in the night, but he couldn't be sure that it wasn't just his dreams.

It was Margot's visit that gave him hope.

Alana had said no more to him since that first night in this room, and as he grew stronger it was in part because he trusted in her promise. Even if no more had been said, he understood from her demeanour that whatever she had planned was progressing. That soon they would be married and there was some safety in that. Margot's visit, the reminder of her existence as Alana's lover, made it all feel more achievable.

"Good," Will replied to Abigail with a smile. And he did feel much better than he had. His hair was growing back but for a couple of patches that never would, his body recovering. In another few weeks only the mental scars would remain. "Stronger."

Abigail returned the smile with a wide one of her own, delighted as ever with his improvement.

"You're recovering well," She agreed, though she had only known the cover story that Bedelia had provided and paid off doctors to confirm. Encephalitis was the official diagnosis, only himself, Bedelia, Alana and the doctors knew the truth.

They made pleasant small talk and she left the side lamp on when she departed for the night, but Will didn't settle to sleep.

He never did. Once alone he would move to the window seat and look out over the lake until he began to nod off. Only then did he move back to the bed, knowing from experience that sleeping awkwardly next to the window would cause him pain.

As he moved to the window, Will felt lighter, healthier than he had in weeks. He'd been regaining an appetite and was more able to move than he liked to let on, not wanting to be forced from this room that had now become something of a refuge.

When he sat in the window and looked out the moon was full, illuminating the lake clearly and the swans moving upon it.

They were near the gardens, the near side of the lake for once, and Will felt drawn. So often they were over the distant end, so far away.

It took only a moment for him to decide what to do. He grabbed his robe and slipped his feet into his slippers before leaving the room. He moved quickly to the back stairs and hallways used by the staff, the journey passing in moments it seemed, as he made his way outside and then across the dew damp grass to the lake in the dead of night.

As he grew near, Will realised the swans had moved further off again, still close enough to see though. And so he sat, in the same place he had that night before all of this had happened. That night he had danced with a swan.

“Your Highness.”

The greeting from behind him made Will still and his breath catch in his throat.

“Are you real?” Will asked without turning to look.

“I am,” The man replied before coming to Will’s side and taking a seat next to him on the grass. “When we first met I was not myself.”

“You were a swan.” Will stated, wanting something, anything to confirm that he truly wasn’t mad.

“I was.” The man agreed and Will let out a sigh of relief. “It is beyond my means to explain how, I remember little more than flashes of images. But you drew me from that form-”

“So you could humiliate me, and ruin me.” Will started to look away.

“No,” The man’s tone was firm but gentle and followed by a light touch of his fingers to Will’s face, guiding Will to look at him. “I had never seen anything more beautiful. Seeing you reminded me of what it was to be human, what I might have. What I wanted.”

“Wanted,” Will repeated the word to himself. He had wanted, desired, things he had been punished for.

They were quiet for a few moments and Will expected the man’s hand to fall away, but it didn’t, it moved to the back of his neck and played with the hair there.

“You reminded me of my purpose, and in the time since we last spoke, you have become part of that purpose. We are all allies.”

Will narrowed his eyes. “Are you helping Alana?”

The man’s smile was gentle, “We are helping each other.”

Will frowned at that and tried to pull away, his mind suddenly filled with the idea that they might be lovers. But the man didn’t let him go, holding him tight in place, though his grip remained soft.

“I know you will find it difficult to trust me, after the way I treated you. But please believe there was a reason. There was an opportunity there that I had to take. I had never intended you to suffer these hardships, but it will be better, I promise.”

Will shook his head, “I don’t see how I can trust you.” He remembered that night at the ball, the night that had resulted in long days and nights, weeks of being tortured in the name of a cure for what Will could not help being.

“I know. So I will tell you something that I hope will help you towards that trust.” The man replied, his hand loosening and then falling away, down to take up one of Will’s hands in his own. “You asked me once for my name and I didn’t give it to you. I will give it to you now. My name is Hannibal Lecter and this was once my home. I mean to make it so again.”

Will took in a sharp breath and drew back just as sharply but Hannibal kept hold of his hand.

He could see it immediately, the resemblance of this man to the photos of the young man that had once been Prince.

“I was given a purpose, to avenge my family and take back the throne. But years passed and I was revived into this form with no desire but to find out whether my sister still lived and…” He pulled Will’s hand to his chest, “And to know better the enchanting creature that I would watch from the water.”

Will let out a shaky breath and blinked.

“Did you find your sister?” Will asked, trying to process the other words, and that apparently was obvious from Hannibal’s gentle smirk.

He didn’t answer though, instead he leaned in and replied quietly, a little above a whisper, “These stories are long and for another night. I will be missed soon and you might be too. I will tell you everything, Will. When I can. But until then, I just ask one thing of you.”

Will blinked again and shook his head, trying to right his mind. “What is that?”

“Something simple and sweet. Something I have struggled daily not to come into your room and beg for.”

Will swallowed, eyes wide now as Hannibal leaned in and closed the distance between them.

Their lips came together in a soft press that deepened in moments. Hannibal’s hand came up to cup Will’s cheek and he whimpered into the kiss.

He wasn’t sure what to make of any of this, but in that moment he cared about nothing else but feeling the flutter of his heart like this again and again.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Finally, a way out of it all with Hannibal by his side.

Chapter Notes

A couple of notes.
Firstly, sorry no smut. This has originally been intended to be explicit, but as I wrote this final chapter it really just didn't fit. I didn't want to force in some sex just for sake of it. I've knocked it down to Mature in respect of some of the content regarding conversion therapy, depression and dark thoughts.

Secondly, I have been completely wiped out by the the new lock down, I am still working my usual hours whilst now also home-schooling my spawnling. So I've not had the chance to as thoroughly edit this as usual. Sorry :(

Will looked at himself in the mirror. His uniform was ironed and perfect. Brass polished.

Unlike the soldiers, he wasn't in a combat uniform, he was in a dress uniform like that of his father. Earned not by experience but by his birth.

He hated it.

He hated who this uniform made him. He'd been only a few years old when his father had become King, when the old regimes had fallen and the country had ended up divided into new kingdoms that had slowly turned to war.

Will had gone from a happy, loved baby, to an increasingly insular child. Mother had died, his step mother disliked him at the least, and his father grew ever distant with every year as his crown grew heavier. It was something Will never wanted.

Even less when he realised that, as he watched his father's young aide, his step mother watched him.

Will turned back to the mirror and looked at the form he was to present out there on the field as he accompanied his father into battle. He might die in this war, and if he lived it would be as a prisoner of his own life.

He just hoped he did not outlive his father, that would be the worst possible outcome that he could envisage.

Present

Will looked in the mirror and righted his shirt.

He didn't look like the same person who had stood in front of that mirror dressing himself the last time he had joined a council meeting.

He was older, harder. But also freer, less afraid.

The memory of the kiss by the lake weeks before continued to bolster him. The daily promises of Alana that everything would work out just fine, the knowing smile that came with them, gave him hope. The agreements he had made with both Hannibal and Alana meant that soon, he hoped with all his heart, he would be free.

"Are you ready?" Abigail asked, looking Will over. "It's nice to see you in something other than pyjamas."

Will returned her smile and then gave a nod.

"I'm ready."

She offered her elbow for support but he shook his head. He was strong now, and though he still had a few moments of wobbling on his legs, he didn't want to be seen to need any help. Especially not today.

Today Alana had asked for him to attend the council meeting. The meeting of all the ministers of government, including his betrothed, overseen by the Regend in his stead.

Today was the day.

Will was to attend so that he could quietly and calmly, let them know that he planned to denounce his claim to the throne, leaving it for Bedelia to take control. He would hear them out, any protests, but the decision would be made. He and Alana would marry and he would step down, Alana his only connection to the government.

When he stepped into the room it was full of a low chatter, and he was pleased when it didn't stop. When no one seemed to take much notice of his arrival. Thankful, he stopped for a moment at the top of the steps and looked out of the expansive windows overlooking the city. It was a beautiful sight that he hoped never to have to see again.

The room was as large as it had ever been, row upon row of chairs laid out as an auditorium, with the long table for the Ministers in the large area that made up the room itself. It was as large, and yet it seemed smaller than it ever had.

It was another room in this place that was familiar and no longer so at the same time. It belonged to another life, another Will. One he could never be again whether he wanted to be or not. He could only continue to move forward.

And so he did, putting one foot in front of the other on the steps as he made his way down to the Minister's table. For now this was the same, he would sit at the one end, Bedelia at the other, the Ministers between them in their advisory capacity. There was no mistaking that power itself sat

with the Regent and she alone, that had been by careful design over many years and strategic appointments.

As Will looked at their faces now, there was no denying the truth. All hand-picked cronies that bolstered the Regent's power, setting her up nicely should she wish to depose him. One way or the other. She would not have the chance now.

"Your Highness," Bedelia greeted him with a fond if formal smile, though Will didn't miss the flicker in her expression when she had first seen him there. He was clearly not expected.

"Regent," He made a shallow bow and then stepped up to his usual seat.

And that was when the chattering stopped and eyes turned to him, and then to Bedelia. Had she been sitting in his chair whilst he had been indisposed? A few cleared throats later, everyone went back about their business but it was clear a few still watched in order to gauge a reaction.

As he looked at their faces in turn, his gaze fell upon Minister Bloom, his betrothed. Her smile was more than fond, something there exuding comfort and warmth.

The Speaker called the room to order and as things quietened down she turned to Will and began to speak.

"We are delighted to see His Highness is well enough to join us once again." The words were meant and there were murmurs of agreement at the table and some light applause from the seats. Will inclined his head in thanks.

"First order of business, Minister Bloom has asked to speak first on an important matter arising to the rearrangement of the delayed coronation." The Speaker's eyes flicked to him for a moment he noticed, but he was now focused on Bedelia.

The thin line of her smile made it clear to him that she knew nothing about this, in fact she cleared her throat and spoke up.

"Surely the sub-committee you requested can make these arrangements without interfering with the process of government." Bedelia's tone was cool and calm, she smiled but there was no friendliness there. And Will knew her well enough to see that she had been caught off guard by this.

She had trusted Alana and this was unexpected.

"Yes, the sub-committee," Alana replied, looking up at the doors at the top of the auditorium. They opened and several people filed in, behind them Hannibal, and behind him several armed guards that looked to be military.

"What is the meaning of this! Armed guards are not permitted here." Bedelia demanded answers as the room erupted into concerned chatter. A few people got to their feet and there was an increasing disorder. Her eyes narrowed, "Olor?"

"Forgive the intrusion," Hannibal's voice boomed across the room, commanding and clear. All eyes turned to him as he made his way down. "Minister Bloom."

Everyone turned back to Alana who smiled and gave a nod, "Ministers," She turned back to the table. "Your services are no longer required."

There was more commotion, and then the sound of the guns being raised though not cocked.

“If you’d be so good as to give up your seats.”

There was nervous panic as they complied, some with hesitation but most without. They rose and started to move aside, talking and clearly distressed as their seats were taken by the people that had just come in. The Ministers Alana had hand picked for what had been assumed to be a sub-committee. People loyal to the country not the Regent.

Will watched with a detached interest for a moment, before his focus was brought back to Bedelia as she rose to her feet. This wasn’t what he had expected either, but he knew his part still remained the same no matter what came next.

The sickening pull in his gut told him to prepare himself that Hannibal and Alana anticipated taking the throne together in this coup. Any such betrayal would hurt, but now all Will cared was that he might finally be free.

“I demand to know what you think you are doing.” Bedelia’s voice rose above the chatter.

Alana looked at Will, and Will knew his time had come.

He stood, ignoring the commotion in the room around them, he addressed Alana directly. “Minister Bloom, please make note in the record that I hereby renounce my title and claim to the throne and any lands or benefits bestowed to that position.”

“So recorded,” Alana replied, nodding to a Minister who did then note it, before giving Will a fond smile as the room erupted into noise. Shock, fear, confusion.

Alana turned to Bedelia then, smile gone and replaced with a stern look, “Bedelia Du Maurier, you are hereby relieved of your position as Regent for the renounced Prince William.”

Will blinked as Bedelia turned to look at him.

“You have no right. If Will renounces his claim then I-”

“Are no longer required as Regent.” Hannibal interrupted then, coming to stand next to Minister Bloom. “Thank you, Mischa.” Hannibal smiled at Alana.

More shock and a couple of cries in the gathered politicians of disbelief and rejection.

The noise was so loud, but all Will could focus on was Hannibal and Alana - Mischa - walking towards his end of the table.

When Hannibal stopped in front of Will and held out his hand, Will took it without any hesitation.

Hannibal turned back to Alana, the room going silent as they awaited his words. “I, Prince Hannibal Lecter also renounce my claim on the throne and abdicate in favour of my sister, and rightful heir, Minister Bloom. Mischa Lecter.”

Their murmurings become roars, there were gasps. Noise started to fill the air as Will stood there, Hannibal clasping his hand as Alana moved to take Will’s offered seat.

“You have no rights here!” Bedelia insisted, slamming a hand down onto the table. “The Lecters fell-”

“Our parents, yes.” Hannibal agreed. “However, we are a new generation are we not? The fruit of our parent’s actions? Myself, Mischa and Will.”

“You cannot do this,” Bedelia insisted, spitting the words.

“I think you find, it’s already done.” Alana said with a smile, “I have more claim than you. I am taking back the house my father built.”

Despite the confused and fearful chatter still going on all around them, the seated Ministers applauded.

Hannibal steered Will to the edge of the room as Alana raised her hands for quiet and began to speak over some continued mutterings.

“Ministers, representatives. Please know that I plan to serve this country well as Queen as I have as Minister. With fairness and equality.” She looked around the chambers as she continued, “This is not a coup, this is a reclamation. All of you in this government play a crucial part, and I hope you will continue to do so. If you feel you can no longer serve the people, please know there will be no repercussions.”

“The only person that I request to leave is the former Regent, Bedelia Du Maurier.” Despite the increase in chatter once more, Alana was calm as she raised her voice to be heard over the crowd, her eyes on Bedelia. “We acknowledge your service to this country. But with no position in government other than Regent to the Prince, there is no longer a place for you to occupy.”

Bedelia began to protest this once more, but the majority of the ministers seemed to have now switched allegiance.

Hannibal leaned in, squeezing Will’s elbow. “Let’s go, Will. You no longer need to be here.”

Will smiled. He no longer did.

*

Hannibal was silent as he escorted Will quickly through the grand house until they were at Will’s chambers. He locked the door behind them and turned to see Will standing by the window, looking out over the lake.

“You’re free now,” Hannibal said quietly, “We both are.”

Will drew in a deep breath and didn’t turn as he spoke, shaking a little. “You lied to me, both of you.”

“We did, but I hope you can understand why.” Hannibal urged, a pain in his chest at the hurt he had caused.

“I don’t.” Will shook his head, finally turning, his eyes wet.

Hannibal wanted to pull him into his arms but he was aware that it might not be welcome.

“I can only apologise, and promise that I will make it up to you for the rest of my life.” Hannibal began. When Will didn’t reply, he took the chance to continue. “Mischa and I met here by chance, but our goals were the same. To regain power for our family, and save you.”

Will’s jaw clenched and unclenched and Hannibal stepped forward, slowly reaching forward to take his hand. Will didn’t resist.

“I never wanted the throne, I simply wanted to bring down the Regent. And I wanted you. I never wanted this life of my father’s any more than you. We can both leave it behind now. Knowing that the people are well taken care of by a leader who will be fair and never self serving.”

Will seemed to relax all the more as Hannibal spoke.

“But to do this, there had to be deception. I had to make the Regent believe that I cared for her, in order to manipulate her to trust Mischa. I wanted to explain everything that night by the lake, but you must understand, I could not reveal Mischa, I had to protect my sister as I never had the chance those years ago.”

Hannibal felt the pull of those memories and took in a deep breath.

“Thank you for explaining, I… I can’t pretend I haven’t been hurt. But I understand why. And I do forgive you. Both of you. I can’t go from this day holding negativity in my heart. I just… I want to be free.” Will’s words shook.

“You are.” Hannibal pulled Will to him, unable to resist further. And Will went, burying his face in Hannibal’s neck and shuddering.

“My father would have wished for me to kill you. But as the years wore on in that feathered form I was less and less my father’s son. I never wanted the throne, even less so as time passed. And not at all since I recovered my form and saw your beautiful face. I saw the agony inside you that was identical to my own. I was trapped in my cage as you were trapped in yours.”

Will let out a whimper.

“Now we’re free.” Hannibal promised.

*

Will kept his eyes closed as he listened to the birds outside the bedroom window.

It was so peaceful in this place. A small cottage by the sea in the lands where his mother had originally hailed from. They were far beyond the city where Will had been raised before his father had marched them on Unity Hall in his enemy’s city.

Hannibal’s city.

To think that had things been different, just for a moment, had the armies clashed at a different point then they might have met in battle. Had there been no war at all they might have met in peace.

Would they have fallen in love if they had? As they had now.

“Another peaceful day, my love.” Hannibal’s words crooned as he wandered into the bedroom.

Will opened his eyes and smiled, watching as his lover moved around the room with a grace that he had never lost even after he lost his swan form.

With just a towel around his waist and still damp from the shower, Hannibal reclined next to Will, propping himself on his elbow so that he could gaze at him.

Will loved the way that Hannibal looked him. The adoration there.

It was part of the peace he had found.

They had found that peace together back in the city as Mischa began her rule, Margot at her side and a strong government that supported her.

There were of course those who would not be happy, but their sedition was brief and small. Put down by the newly formed forces of those loyal to the Lecters. Those who had fled or hidden when Unity Hall had fallen.

Mischa was fair and rewarding to those loyal but willing to hear those who were not.

Will could see how well she was suited to the role, and all the good she would do. But he could not stay and witness.

Years of sadness and hopelessness would not be healed in so short a time. And so Mischa made arrangements for him to come to this place. His own haven.

One that Hannibal visited often. To the point where Will was all the sadder to see him go each time he returned to the city.

Hannibal had been instrumental in reforming the new government and uniting the people. Taking power back for the Lecters in a way his father would likely not have imagined. And as those duties wound down, he visited all the more.

Will sighed as Hannibal brushed his hair back from his face.

He felt nothing but sweet bliss after the evening they had spent together. Hannibal had arrived the previous afternoon and they had become reacquainted with each other.

It had been a slow and tender thing to work up to the expressions of love they now found in each other. Will wanted so desperately to be with Hannibal in every way, but there was no denying that the treatments he had received had taken their toll on both his body and mind.

It was with gentle coaxing and loving patience that Hannibal had created a safe space for their intimacy. And Will was loath to think he would be gone again in just a day.

“I miss you more every time you leave.” Will didn’t stop the spill of words as he looked into Hannibal’s eyes.

“I wanted to give you your space. You needed to rebuild a life for yourself without me as a consideration.” Hannibal replied, something Will knew well.

“I know. And I have. And I still want you. Every time we are together I dread you leaving. When we’re… intimate, I want more but know it will take longer than I have you for.”

Hannibal smiled softly but didn't reply, leaving Will space to speak.

They had made love for the first time only a few weeks earlier, but not yet again since.

Will wanted to, but he needed time, time they never seemed to have.

"I want you to stay." Will finally said.

Hannibal let out a soft sigh, closing his eyes and resting his forehead against Will's.

Will had thought it so many times, but this was the first time he had uttered the words.

"I have longed for those words, darling." Hannibal said quietly. "If you want me to stay, I would do so forever."

Will jerked back, the action causing Hannibal to pull away from him until they were looking into each other's eyes once more.

"You mean it?" Will asked, cocking a brow.

Hannibal chuckled, "I've not wanted to leave since the first moment I stepped foot into this place. But I needed the decision to be yours. This is your home, your life."

"And you're my love. My everything." Will replied softly.

"Will." Hannibal leaned in and kissed him so gently that his lips felt feather light against him.

He knew Hannibal had his own adjustments. Memories of being trapped in his swan body had faded somewhat, and so instead it was a gap of so many blank years, and strange feelings and instincts that came with that emptiness and all the things he could no longer recall.

Will hadn't wanted to give Hannibal his space too.

But it had been a year. One that had passed at a snail's pace and the blink of an eye.

"Stay," Will reiterated. "If you want to, then I want you to."

"I will," Hannibal replied, leaning in to kiss Will once more.

The kiss was soft and languid, sensual and loving.

It was a surprise to Will when it ended suddenly, Hannibal moving from the bed, the towel falling away. Before Will had a chance to ask what he was doing, he tugged Will's hand until he was on his feet too.

Beside the bed, laughing, their bodies naked against each other, Hannibal danced and Will went with him. Floating and swaying, turning and dipping just as they had that first night they had met.

When everything had been so different.

Will let out a sob with his laughter, never once had he imagined that he would be the subject of a modern fairytale, and yet here he was.

A story that might be told some day by the succeeding generations.

The fall of the Lecters, the fall of the Grahams. The deposing of the Regent and Coronation of Queen Mischa.

And the strange, wondrous tale of the Reluctant Heir and his Swan Prince.

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